



AN
ESSAY
AGAINST
Unnecessary Curiosity
IN
MATTERS OF RELIGION.



THE desire of know-
ledge is so agreeable
to our intelligent natures, and the
pleasure of finding it so engaging
and transporting, that the most
temperate minds can hardly set
themselves any bounds or limits, in the search and
pursuit of it. Small indeed, is the advance the grea-
test and most inquisitive genius can make in the
knowledge of truth, in this present state of dark-
ness and imperfection; yet that degree of know-
ledge which is attainable has charms enough to en-
courage great attention, and to make the enqui-
rers after it, easily overcome the fatigue of close
study, and despise many temporal inconveniencies
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*The Intro-
duction.*

which attend it, so as sometimes to impair their health, and even forego or neglect the necessities of life.

And indeed, there is an excellency in knowledge that renders it very worthy of our esteem, and highly deserving our most laborious endeavours. *Wisdom*, says Solomon, *is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding.* Our intellectual faculties were made for the discovery and contemplation of truth ; and the knowledge of it, even absolutely and in it self consider'd, is highly perfective of human understanding. The great distinction we make between men in our esteem, with respect to the different measures of wisdom and knowledge we imagine they possess, is an evidence that mankind are agreed that these are things which do greatly ennoble our nature, and very much conduce to the perfection of it.

But notwithstanding all this, when we consider how limited and imperfect our intellectual faculties are ; and how little time our short span of life affords us, either to *get* knowledge, or to *enjoy* that which we have acquir'd ; and that, after our most diligent enquiries and researches, we must necessarily be ignorant of *many* things ; even of many *more* than we are acquainted with ; when all this is consider'd, it must appear very becoming us as reasonable creatures, and a necessary part of our duty, to endeavour chiefly after the knowledge of such things as are of the greatest importance to us ; to labour for that knowledge which has the nearest relation to, and the greatest

greatest influence upon, our happiness; that if we cannot so *enlarge* and *extend* our faculties as to avoid some degree of ignorance, yet we may so *manage* and *apply* them as not to suffer by it, in our greatest and most important interest.

This conduct of ourselves, in our endeavours after *religious knowledge*, is what I intend to recommend and enforce in the following *ESSAY*; that I may, if possible, take men off from the pursuit of things which God hath not thought fit to reveal to us, and those sublime notions and unintelligible mysteries with which they do generally amuse and distract themselves; and persuade them to imploy their chief study and concern about those things to which their capacity is proportion'd, and which are of great concernment to them to be informed of, *viz.* Things of a *moral* nature, and which have an immediate influence on life and practice.

Now, in order to this, it may be proper to observe, that there are many *secret things* that belong unto the Lord our God (as *Moses* expresses it) *i. e.* things which he has not been pleas'd to reveal unto us, and which we, without a divine revelation, cannot attain unto the knowledge of. Various are the revelations and discoveries God hath been pleas'd to make of his Will to mankind: *At sundry times and divers manners he spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets.* Where we are not to understand, by *prophets*, those only who foretold future events, but any persons who were divinely inspir'd, and

God has concealed many things from mankind.

Deut. xxix. last v.

Heb. i. v. 1.

to whom God made any supernatural discovery of himself; several ways of doing which we find mention'd in holy Scripture: but these were none of them design'd to gratify mens curiosity about nice and subtle questions and matters of high notion and theory, but only to discover to them such things as were necessary to make them good and virtuous here, in order to their being eternally happy hereafter.

In the clearest and fullest revelation that ever was made to the world, by the Son of God himself, who is styled *the wisdom of the Father*, and *in whom dwelt all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*, even in this revelation we are taught only such things as are necessary to reform and amend the lives and manners of men. The great design of the Gospel is not to fill mens *heads* with nice and useless speculations, but to possess their *hearts* with the love of piety and virtue, and to excite them to the practice of those divine and god-like graces by which they may resemble the glorious author of their being. Our Lord came into the world not to set up a *school* of disputants and virtuoso's in it, but a *church*: His institution was not design'd to exercise the wits, but to renew the minds, and reform the manners of men, and to *make us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light*. He fully declar'd to the world whatever was necessary or conducive to these ends, but never open'd his divine lips concerning things which had no tendency or relation thereto.

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And that e-
ven in the Chri-
stian Revelati-
on.

1 Cor. i. 24.
Coloss. ii. 3.

Coloss. i. 12.

He did not puzzle his hearers with abstruse speculations, and sublime mysteries ; but in a way of plain and familiar instruction inform'd them of those things (and of those only) which were useful and necessary for them to know in order to salvation. The Gospel of Christ is called in Scripture a *mystery*, not so much on the account of any obscurity or great difficulty in its doctrines, when revealed, as because it had been conceal'd and hid, from foregoing ages and generations. However, it is a *mystery of godliness*, and its great end and aim is not to make men acute and able disputers, but exact and holy liver.

See Ephes. iii.
9. and Coloss.
i. 26.

i Tim. iii.
16.

This will appear to any one who, with a tolerable degree of attention, looks into the sermons and discourses of our Saviour when here on earth ; or peruses the subsequent writings of the apostles, and first teachers of the Gospel ; which were intended to explain and enforce the christian doctrine. We shall by all these easily perceive, that it is not the design of the Gospel
 “ to disclose *the deep things of God* ; to open
 “ and uncover the great mysteries of the adorable
 “ *Trinity* ; the eternal generation of the Son, or
 “ the procession of the Holy-Ghost : not to acquaint us with the *order* and *manner* of the
 “ *divine decrees*, and their *consistence* with human
 “ *liberty* ; with the secrets of *nature*, or the intricacies of *providence* : not to declare to us,
 “ why the *world* was no sooner made ; or why
 “ the *law* was no sooner given, or the *christian*
 “ *religion*

*This proved
and illustrated
by an induction
of particulars.*

“ *religion* itself no sooner made known to man-
 “ kind : not to inform us of the *order* and *hie-*
 “ *rarchy* of the *Angels* ; *when* they were crea-
 “ ted ; *how long* they all continu’d in their hap-
 “ *py* state ; what those of them that fell, cou’d
 “ find, that shou’d make beings of such excellence
 “ and wisdom uneasy under the government of
 “ so mild and kind a Creator ; and what made
 “ their fallen state deserve so little pity that even
 “ the most compassionate Jesus did not join *their*
 “ case with *ours* in the great work of redemp-
 “ tion : not to declare how, and in what man-
 “ ner the *grace of God* operates on the minds of
 “ men in restoring them to the divine image in
 “ *righteousness and true holiness* : not to inform
 “ us how the *soul* now lives *in* the body, or
 “ how it shall live hereafter *without* it ; or whe-
 “ ther it had any existence before it came into
 “ it : not to discover to us the time that God
 “ hath prefix’d for the great and final *Judgment* ;
 “ or declare *how the dead shall be* then raised,
 “ *and with what body they do come* ; i. e. how
 “ their bodies shall be modify’d and organiz’d,
 “ what their powers and capacities shall be, and
 “ according to what age or stature they shall rise,
 “ and how the bodies of good and bad men will
 “ differ from each other : not to make known
 “ to us where *Hell* is ; whether in the central
 “ parts of the earth ; or in the SUN*, or in
 “ the ethereal regions above the sun and fixed

* Vide Swinden’s enquiry into the nature and place of Hell ; prov-
 ing (as he says) that the SUN is the common receptacle of the devils
 and wicked men ; and that they shall be tormented in it for ever
 and ever.

"stars; what the punishments are there; whe-
 "ther its fire be material; and, if so, what im-
 "mortal fuel that must be, that can everlastingly
 "feed its hungry flames: nor yet where *Heaven*
 "is; or what its felicities precisely are; whether
 "they consist chiefly in the perfection of the *un-*
 "*derstanding*, or *will*; in the *love*, or in the
 "*vision* of God; whether the souls of the bles-
 "sed shall retain all their former faculties, and
 "whether any new ones shall be added to them;
 "whether their knowledge will be *sudden* and
 "*instantaneous*, or eternally progressive; what
 "their work and employment shall be; in what
 "way God will reveal himself to them; what
 "kind of conversation they may have with the
 "blessed Angels, and with one another; whe-
 "ther they shall stand affected in any peculiar
 "manner to those who were their friends and
 "relations, and pious acquaintance in this world;
 "and how far they shall know, and be known
 "to one another": We may, I say, easily per-
 ceive, upon reading of it, that it was not the
 design of the Gospel to gratify our curiosity in
 such speculations as these: they are things indeed,
 which our prying, inquisitive nature wou'd be glad
 enough to know (and which some have boldly
 presumed to determine) but which the holy wri-
 ters have not been empower'd to reveal and dis-
 cover to us. As they do not, in their own na-
 ture, fall under the discovery of human under-
 standing, and consequently are impossible to be
 known any farther than they are distinctly reveal-
 ed by almighty God, so they seem to be, as it
 were, industriously kept secret by him, because
 they

they are not of use to mankind to be known in order to the great end of religion.

The reason of this, is, because such speculations are of no use to be known.

This seems to be the measure of all the revelations God is pleas'd to make to his creatures; namely, the use and influence of them in the conduct of our lives: the manifestations he hath made of himself and his will, are proportion'd to the use and necessity there is of their being known to us, as they tend to the end for which they are made; which was to let us know so much of God and Christ, and of their gracious dispensations towards us, and purposes concerning us, as may engage us to receive and obey the Gospel, and thereby save our souls, and not to feed and entertain our curiosity. It may therefore reasonably be suppos'd of all such curious questions as those I have mention'd above, that the determination of them (if we were now capable of it) wou'd be of little use to us; that it wou'd not be very serviceable, or, at least, is not necessary to the great ends and purposes of religion. There is as much revealed as is necessary to direct us in our duty, and persuade us to the practice of it. And for us to be prying and intruding into those things which God has not thought fit to let us see and know, is an useless and troublesome, as well as fruitless curiosity, which serves only to divert us from our main concern.

And, probably, it is upon this ground, that our blessed Saviour so often refus'd to satisfy the curiosity of men, who apply'd themselves to him for information in doubtful and difficult matters,
of

of no use to the conduct of their lives and actions. I shall mention two or three remarkable instances to this purpose. We have one in the 13th. chapter of St. *Luke's* Gospel; where we are told, that *one came and said, Lord, are there few that shall be saved?* To which curious question, our Saviour does not give a direct answer, because it was neither necessary nor useful to his hearers to be resolv'd in it; it did not concern them to know what number of persons should be saved, but what course they themselves should take, that they might be of that happy number, whatever it were: and therefore instead of satisfying the curiosity of this enquirer, he puts him, and his other hearers upon their duty; admonishing them, instead of being curious to know what should become of others, rather to take care of themselves: *And he said unto them* (as it is ver. 24th,) *strive ye to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.* We have another such instance of our Saviour's behaviour in the 21st. chapter of St. *John's* Gospel. Our Lord had inform'd St. *Peter* that he should become a martyr for his religion, or by what kind of death he should glorify God. But this would not satisfy him without knowing also what should be the fate of St. *John*, the beloved disciple; and so he puts this question to our Saviour, *What shall this man do?* or what shall become of him? But our Lord refus'd to satisfy his curiosity in this point; and though he could, if he had pleas'd, as easily have inform'd St. *Peter* what should become of the beloved disciple as of himself,

self, yet he reproves his enquiring into it, because no benefit was to be had by such information: *Jesus said unto him, If I will that he tarry 'till I come, what is that to thee! Follow thou me; i. e.* what wilt thou be the better, if I should tell thee what this man shall do? Will it contribute any thing to *thy* preparation for following me, to know whether he shall be required to tread in the same steps? Thus also he behav'd himself in the question put to him by his disciples, concerning the blind man whom he restor'd to sight. *Master, say they, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? (John ix.)* this was a very curious question; for it seems to suppose the man in a capacity of sinning, before his coming into this state, and to proceed upon the supposition of the pre-existence of souls; an opinion held by many at that time both among the Jews and Gentiles. And the disciples might very well be desirous to have our Saviour's judgment in so curious a point. But so far was he from giving them that satisfaction, that he utterly declines saying any thing at all to that point: he only tells them, that it was neither upon the account of the man's sin nor his parents, that he was born blind; *but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.* This way of answering was useful and edifying to them, because it serv'd to prevent their entertaining any uncharitable opinion of the poor man upon the account of his severe affliction; but whether his soul did pre-exist, before its union with the body, or no (the being resolv'd and satisfy'd in which curious point seems to have been their main end

[II]

end in putting the question) this he wholly declines and passes over with silence as having no tendency to make them more good and virtuous, which was the great design of his appearance in the world. And (to give but one instance more) when the disciples, in their conversation with him after his resurrection, demanded of him, *Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?* i. e. wilt thou gather the Jewish nation from their dispersion, and raise it again into a victorious and powerful state! (as they expected the Messiah would do) I say, when they put this question to our Saviour he gives them no direct answer, neither that he would, nor that he would not do what they expected, but gently reprehends their curiosity (v. 7.) *It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father hath put into his own power.* And instead of satisfying them in things that did not concern them, he discourseth to them about those things that did, namely, how they should be qualify'd and sent forth to preach the Gospel to the world; as we read in the following verses. [Several other instances of this kind may be seen in Dr. Clark's excellent volume of sermons lately publish'd, p. 183, &c.]

But, besides that the things which God hath not discover'd to us, are such as would not be serviceable to the great design of religion, the making us more good and virtuous, there are other reasons for his dealing thus with us. One of which is, our incapacity in the present state, for the distinct apprehending of them.

Acts i. 6. do!

There are several other reasons why God conceals some things from us.

Many of those things which we so eagerly desire to know, are hidden from our view, because our present capacities are not suited and proportion'd to the comprehension of them.

(This is evidently the case with relation to the divine nature and perfections. *Canst thou* (says

Job. ii. 7. *Job's friend*) *by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Al-*

mighty to perfection? i. e. It is impossible thou shouldst. Our finite understanding bears no proportion to his infinite essence: it is too narrow for so vast an object. Accordingly God hath plainly told us, that (whatever our curiosity may aspire unto) he is not an object for a mortal

view. *Thou canst not see my face,* says he to Moses, *for no man shall see my face and live.* And St. Paul,

Exod. xxxv.

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1 Tim. vi.

16.

to the same purpose, tells us, that *God dwelleth in that light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, or can see.* All the discoveries God makes of himself to us, in the present state, are accommodated to our limited and imperfect capacities. The acts and operations of the divine nature are represented to us in Scripture by figures and comparisons taken from our own powers and ways of acting; and the like affections are ascrib'd to God, as we find in ourselves. Not that we are to think the Deity *altogether such a Being as ourselves*, or that his actions and ways are like ours: but the divine majesty is pleas'd thus to condescend to our capacities, and adapt his expressions concerning himself to our ideas and conceptions, because indeed we are not capable of seeing, know-
ing,

ing, and conceiving of him as he really is. So that whatever we can know of the Almighty, either by the light of nature and reason, or even by divine revelation, must, in this state, fall vastly short of his infinite perfections, and bear no proportion to what still remains, and must remain, unknown to us.

This is very much the case also in reference to the things of another world; especially the felicities of that state. Our present faculties are too dull to have a sight of such transcendent glories, and too weak to endure the dazzling lustre of them; and if we could have a full and distinct view of the things of *other* world, it would possibly affect us so much, as to hinder us in the discharge of the necessary business of *this*. They are therefore conceal'd from us for the like reason that our Saviour declin'd to impart many things to his disciples; that is, their incapacity for receiving them: *I have many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now.* John xvi. 12. This is our case with regard to the glories of the future world; we cannot bear a full account of them now.

So that there is a kind of *shade* cast over both the glorious perfections of the divine nature, and the future happiness of good men, because it is impossible for us to see them here but very imperfectly; *through a glass darkly*, or obscurely, and through the veil of faith. The knowledge of these things is too wonderful and excellent for our imperfect and limited faculties; *we cannot attain unto it.* And besides, if we were capable of it, yet in this state

1 Cor. xiii. 12.

state of probation, it is fit we should live by *faith*, and not by the *sight* of the glorious recompence we expect.

It may be consider'd farther, that God has many wise and good ends to serve by reserving so many secret things to himself, both in regard to the advancement of his own glory, and our improvement in several of the most excellent graces and virtues of the Christian life. For by thus hiding these things from us, God teaches us to depend upon, and trust in, him; to acknowledge his authority and veracity; to repair to him for farther light and instruction; and, in the meantime, to set the greater value upon those revelations he hath graciously made to us; to exercise the virtues of patience, resignation, and hope, and especially the most profound humility; which teaches us to *think soberly of our selves as we ought to think*; to submit our high reasonings, and cast down our towering imaginations, and every thing that exalts its self against truth and wisdom of God; and to *bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*.

The practical improvement of the foregoing considerations.

lives.

E. We should learn from hence not to be too curious in unrevealed and unnecessary things.

3161

These considerations may be improv'd to several excellent purposes, both for the informing of our judgments, and the direction of our

Since God, for such wise and admirable ends, hath conceal'd the knowledge of so many things from us, we ought to comply with his gracious designs, and not be too cu-

rious

rious in prying into things not clearly revealed, but be content to be ignorant of what he hath not thought fit to discover to us. It is the excellent advice of the wise son of *Syrach*; *Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength. But what is commanded thee think thereupon with reverence*; for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things that be in secret; be not curious in unnecessary matters. And a wiser than he tells us, that it is the glory of God to conceal a thing. And is it not then a dishonouring of him, for men busily and curiously to pry into that which he hath conceal'd? Besides that, it is a bold invasion of God's peculiar, it evidently implies a distrust either of his wisdom or goodness; it supposes him either so ignorant of the strength of those faculties himself hath made, that he hath assign'd them unproportionable objects, and so they must have others carv'd out for them by ourselves; or else it implies that *his eye is evil* towards his own creatures; that (as the Devil once suggested to our first parents) God envies our happiness, and, for that reason, hath confin'd our intellectual views within such narrow limits; and that he will not suffer us to know so much as we might, lest we rival the divine nature, *and be as Gods knowing good and evil*.

Ecclus. iii. 23.

Prov. xxv. 2.

There is great *folly* in this busy and curious temper of mind. For 'tis utterly vain and fruitless for men to attempt to know more than God pleases to discover to them; 'tis to no manner of purpose

purpose to make bold and busy intrusions into those secrets that he hath forbidden to be seen. Why then should we so earnestly hunt after that knowledge which we can never attain unto ? When a man is in the dark, had he not much better stand still at first, than wander about 'till he be fatigu'd and tir'd with his journey, but still as far from the end of it, as when he first set out ?

Besides this, when we consider that upon our conduct and behaviour in this world, depends our salvation and happiness in another, we must presently be convinc'd of the gross folly and absurdity of being so eager in the pursuit of barren and unprofitable speculations : this will shew us, that the great business we have to do here on earth, is not to study what will barely entertain and accomplish our minds (which is the utmost such things can do) but what will be of use to us in the conduct of our lives ; what will lead and direct us to our great end, to everlasting happiness and the salvation of our souls. So that if a man be never so expert in the controversies that do so divide and distract the Christian world, but neglects or over-looks the plain truths and duties of the Gospel, all that knowledge is but meer vanity, and idle curiosity. It is therefore not only our *duty*, but a great point of *wisdom*, to be content to be ignorant where the Scripture is silent, and to change our curiosity about things unreveal'd, and unnecessary, into a due care of our salvation. Had the knowledge of such things been necessary to that end, they would have been deliver'd in Scripture with the same

same plainness and perspicuity, as other things of the greatest importance are. God was able to interpret his mind to the world, as plainly in one case, as in another ; and he has done it in all, as far as his infinite wisdom judg'd it necessary to promote the great ends of religion : and therefore where he hath not us'd this plainness, it should be a sufficient check to our curiosity.

There are some parts of knowledge which God hath thought fit to inhibit and exclude us from ; to fence them, as he did the forbidden tree, by threatnings and comminations, and made it not only our folly, but our sin and danger, to attempt them. A vicious curiosity was the occasion of the sin of our first parents, and that which prov'd their ruin. And tho' *this their way was their folly*, and was attended with such fatal consequences, yet *their posterity* have ever been too apt to lust after forbidden knowledge : such a value does our inquisitive nature set upon every thing for its being *hid*, that, as if our life were bound up with these secrets, and all our felicity dwelt in the shade of these recesses, we pursue this search with indefatigable industry : but sure it must be a strange infatuation to imagine, that *that* which expell'd the first parents of mankind from Paradise, can restore happiness to their children. We are told, that *Pliny* lost his life by a too curious search after mount *Vesuvius* ; a just emblem of those who *exercise themselves in great matters, too high for them* ; who are carry'd on by so impetuous a curiosity, that no *bounds* will keep them from the holy mount ; but they will needs break thro' the thick darkness how dread-

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ful soever the thunderings and lightnings are in the way ; and are at last destroy'd, in unfolding what God hath wrapp'd up in darkness and obscurity. We know the dreadful state of *Uzzah* for prying too nearly into the ark of God ; he has reveal'd as much as he judges convenient ; as much as is necessary for our true advantage : to endeavour to discover what he thinks fit to conceal, is to make ourselves wiser than he, and to provoke his justice to chastise our insolence.

But as this curiosity is a temper highly displeasing to God, so it is very pernicious to men. Like all other irregular and inordinate desires, it knows no measure, nor no end. And by perpetually engaging mens minds in new enquiries and speculations, it takes them off from attending to the plain and necessary principles and duties of religion. So that whilst they are minding high things, and neglecting things in which their salvation is more immediately concern'd, they are in danger of falling into condemnation and perdition : like him, who whilst he was gazing at the stars, minded not his way, and fell into a pit. *St. Paul* severely condemns those who zealously concern'd themselves about unprofitable notions and opinions, to the neglect of the plain and practical parts of religion. This is

Titus iii. 8, 9.

a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works ; these things are good and profitable unto men, i. e. They are things which conduce to our eternal happiness. But
avoid

avoid foolish questions and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law. And the reason the apostle gives why these things must be avoided, is, that *they are unprofitable and vain*, i. e. have no tendency to promote the true end of religion, the eternal happiness and salvation of men. And in another place he describes the consequence of not being content to rest in the plain *wholesome words* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by saying that such persons are proud, knowing nothing, but doting upon questions and strifes of words (of their own inventing) whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds. To the same purpose he speaks again, *Flee youthful lusts ; but follow righteousness, faith, charity,* peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strife. Such things do only blow up mens fancies with a vain opinion of themselves, instead of filling their hearts with the true genuine effects of the Christian religion.

1 Tim. vi. 4, 5.

2 Tim. ii. 23.

“ The ancient poets have a fable of *Atalanta*, “ whom they represent as a virgin, so swift of “ foot, that no one could out-run her. One, “ who undertook to run a race with her, contriv’d the matter so as to throw behind him, as “ he run, three golden apples at several times, “ which, whilst she stopp’d to gather up, the other “ out-stripp’d her, and got the victory”. In like manner, the great enemy of souls, in order to hinder us in our Christian course, not only lays

the temptations of pleasure and profit in our way, but also endeavours to raise our vain curiosity by starting a number of subtil, tho' useless questions. And whilst our minds are too much busied about those trifles, we neglect true faith, piety, charity, and other things that are absolutely necessary to *make our calling and election sure.*

II. *Particularly in the great article of the holy Trinity.*

What hath been said of the presumption, the folly, the danger and pernicious consequences of curiosity in general, may with the greatest reason, be particularly apply'd to the explications some have given of the doctrine of the *blessed Trinity*: the disputes concerning which, have, in all ages, arisen, not so much from what is really contain'd in divine revelation, as from the presumption of men (who *were wise above and beyond what is written*) in substituting nice and philosophical explications of their own, in the place of the plain and simple words of Scripture, and rigorously requiring the assent of others to them. The general doctrine is easily perceiv'd and understood, as far as we are requir'd by the Scripture itself, to believe it; namely, that "there is but one God, and yet that there are three persons, Father, Son, and Holy-Ghost, to whom divinity is there expressly ascrib'd". Thus much is so plainly declar'd, so frequently repeated, and with such particular circumstances, that none who believe the divine authority of the Scriptures, can reasonably refuse their assent to it. The great contests in this article of our Faith, have always been about the idea and notion

tion of *Persons in the Trinity* ; of *Generation* and *Procession*, as apply'd to the *Son*, and holy *Spirit* ; and the *distinction* and *unity* of the three persons ; *i. e.* in explaining *how* they are distinguish'd among themselves, and yet united in the divine essence.

But now this doctrine of the *Trinity* depending so entirely on revelation that no man could have known any thing of it, had it not been revealed, nor can possibly know any more of it than is revealed, and these speculations concerning it, being things of which the Scripture is wholly silent, they can be no object of our faith ; they are not at all necessary to be believed by us. For religion requires us to *believe* nothing but what it *reveals* to us ; *i. e.* to our understanding and apprehension. We cannot see an object more fully than it is visible. So that where God hath not discover'd to us *how* and in what *manner* the things he hath revealed *are*, or *can* be, he doth not there require our assent. That a thing *is* thus, is necessary to be believed, because it is revealed by the God of truth ; by him who cannot be deceived himself, nor deceive others ; but the manner *how*, cannot be believed, because it is not revealed : the unreveal'd and conceal'd part, which we have no notion or conception of, cannot possibly bind us to any explicit act of faith. When therefore we are requir'd to believe a thing which we cannot comprehend, no more can be meant, but that we should believe it to be in some manner unknown and undiscover'd to us. The *matter* or *thing* revealed, is an article of faith, and must always be suppos'd

pos'd to be understood by us ; for how can we believe, or give our assent to any point, or proposition, if we do not understand the terms and meaning of it ? But the manner *how it is*, being not revealed to our understanding, can be no object of our faith, except in general and implicitly : We can believe in part only, what is revealed in part ; our faith keeping pace with the word of God, and ending where that ends. Here then (to apply all this to the present case) may we fix our foot ; believing that what God says is infallibly true, and meekly acquiescing in the plain declarations of his word, without a bold scrutiny into hidden things. There are, and necessarily must be, many things relating to the nature, subsistence, and attributes of God, that are perfectly incomprehensible by us ; things that we can form no notion of, and to which our understandings are no way proportion'd. Now here a quiet and contented ignorance would much better become us, than either an over-curious and inquisitive search, or a pretending to that knowledge which we have not, or taking up with empty and insignificant terms for satisfactory answers, rather than own some things to be out of our reach. In all such matters as these, which are too big to be grasped, we had better sit down contented with what we have firm hold of, than tire ourselves with vain endeavours to take in more. To fatigue and harass our minds with what cannot be discover'd, or comprehended by them, is folly enough, let the subject of our enquiry be of what kind soever ; but to act thus in a matter of this high nature, betrays too little reverence

reverence for the tremendous and unsearchable nature of God, and too great an opinion of ourselves. It becomes such imperfect creatures as we are, to be content to *see through a glass darkly*, 'till the time comes to know God more perfectly, and to *see him as he is*; and not to aim at the *knowledge of all mysteries and all faith*, and to *search* and define the deep things of God.

It would be best for us all, to be silent where we have really nothing to say, and not to run riot with mere presumptions and imaginations of our own, about matters infinitely surpassing human comprehension; and thereby expose ourselves to that apostolical censure of *intruding into those things which we have not seen, vainly puff'd up by our fleshly mind*; or, from a proud conceit of our own reason, venturing to dive into, and determine those divine matters, we have no notion of, nor warrant for.

Coloss. ii. 18.

The acting in this presumptuous manner, with relation to this mysterious doctrine of the *holy Trinity*, especially in publick declarations and decisions, has been of very ill consequence to the church of Christ. It is the private notions of men about matters not clearly and distinctly revealed in Scripture, and not the plain doctrines of the Gospel, that kindles our flames, and is the general subject of our intemperate disputes: or (to use the words of one whom I love to think and speak after) "it is the
"presumptuous imposing the senses
"of men upon the words of God----

Chillingworth,
chap. IV. sect.
17.

" the

“ the Deififying our own interpretations, and tyrannous enforcing them upon others; the restraining the word of God from that latitude and generality, and the understandings of men from that liberty wherein Christ and his apostles left them”; it is this that creates our quarrels, and ever must produce opposition.

Whatever liberty is taken by men of learning and leisure, in debating their own questions, and in endeavouring to render their notions more familiar and intelligible to those they would inform and instruct, yet it is certainly the most charitable, and the most safe way in all publick decisions concerning very *abstruse* and *difficult* points (if it be fit to make *any* decisions in such points) to keep as much as may be to Scripture expressions, and not to affect to speak of things which cannot be known but by revelation, and are not fully and distinctly revealed there, but in the language of revelation, not to determine concerning the *deep things of God*, but *in the words of God*. For these being the proper standard of all other words that shall be used on these occasions, 'tis in vain to shift the measure, when there is never another to be found that can, or ought to reach farther. And, I believe, it may be truly said, that when men in the explication of these mysteries, have deviated from the phrase of Scripture, they have always embroiled and perplexed themselves and others, rather than added either strength, or light to the truths of the Gospel. In short, it seems not only safest, but what is *very meet and right*, when men make any publick alterations or decisions concerning

concerning matters of pure revelation, that are abstruse and difficult, and not fully and distinctly revealed, to follow the language of revelation, lest otherwise they seem to assume to themselves, the authority of persons inspir'd, or to think themselves wiser than the holy Spirit himself.

Another proper use of these considerations is, to teach us, to be very gentle and charitable towards those that differ from us, in difficult and abstruse points of religion. Since God hath reserv'd the knowledge of so many things to himself, and we find ourselves so often at a loss, in our religious enquiries, to determine the precise sense and meaning of what he hath revealed, how should this restrain us from all bitterness and uncharitableness upon account of differing sentiments in these matters, and from being too free in fixing the imputation of damnable error and heresy upon every notion and opinion that is not exactly the same with what we have embrac'd?

III. *Not to be bitter and uncharitable towards those that differ from us about difficult and abstruse points of religion.*

That all men should be of the same mind, and agree in the same conceptions and apprehensions of things, is impossible, and no more to be expected, than that all mens faces and complexions should be alike. There will be great diversity of opinions among us, as long as there is any obscurity in any part of divine revelation, and different degrees of sense and understanding among men, and more or less opportunities of coming to the knowledge of truth. Nor is the Christian Religion grounded upon any supposition,

that all the professors of it, should centre and agree in the same set of notions and opinions. On the contrary, it instructs us how we are to behave ourselves towards each other amidst different persuasions, and variety of judgments: not

Gal. v. 15.

Ephes. iv. 2, 3.

Rom. xiv. 1.

See also Gal. iii.

10, 11, 12,

13, 14.

Phil. ii. 1, 2,

3, 4.

to bite and devour one another, but to walk with lowliness and meekness; with long suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring, notwithstanding any diversity of opinion, to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace; and them that are weak in the faith to receive, but not to doubtful disputations; i. e. without judging, or condemning them, or entering into any dispute or contention with them, upon the account of the difference of their sentiments from our own.

How different is all this from the strain of modern declaimers on the subject of our several disputes? Who endeavour to raise the highest animosities upon every punctilio of difference in opinion between them and others; teaching men to put odious marks of distinction upon those that differ from them; to avoid each other's society and communion, and (which is quite the reverse of what the apostle St. Paul teaches) *to speak evil of all men but their own party, to be brawlers and ungentle, shewing meekness unto none, and (more like unenlighten'd and unregenerate heathens than Christians) to live in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.* But surely such a temper and behaviour as this, is as plainly condemn'd in holy Scripture, and must

must prove as fatal to the souls of men, as any error or heresy they can possibly fall into. *This commandment, saith St. John, we have from him, that he who loveth* 1 Joh. iv. 21 *God, love his brother also; and if a man say, he loveth God, and hateth his brother he is a liar.* And yet how frequently do we find, and how lamentable a thing it is to see, men extremely zealous for what they call the *truths of God*, i. e. perhaps only some doubtful and uncertain opinions of their own; while, without scruple, they break such plain and express precepts of the Gospel as these? As if orthodoxy would make an atonement for their censoriousness and uncharitableness; and a burning zeal, was of more value in the sight of God, than beneficence, and an universal good will to mankind. But those who consider things rightly, will never think the worse of any man merely because he differs in opinion from them: they only must be bitter and uncharitable in that case, who know not how easy it is to err.

We may farther learn, not to be too positive and dogmatical in our notions and opinions, especially in things of a difficult and doubtful nature. Those who consider as they ought, the scantiness of their faculties, and how disproportionate they are, to many of the objects about which they are exercised, with the many and various occasions of mistake and error, will always be ready to weigh things without partiality or passion, and not be too stiff and positive in such points, as good and wise men have

IV. Not to be too positive and dogmatical in our notions and opinions.

greatly differ'd about, in all ages. There are some, who having entertain'd a set of notions in religion, are very obstinate and pertinacious in the defence of them; impatient of contradiction, and not willing to listen to any arguments that can be offer'd to incline them to a change; as if they understood all things at first sight, and it were impossible they should ever be wiser than they are. This is a temper very unbecoming such frail and imperfect creatures as we are. A just sense of our darkness and ignorance, in this state, would soon convince us how possible it is for us to be mistaken, and even how easy to imbrace the shadow of truth for its substance and reality; especially in more difficult and abstruse speculations.

I KNOW NOT, has been thought a sentence worthy to proceed from the mouth of one of the wisest of the Philosophers; not thereby to give countenance to perpetual doubting and scepticism, but to intimate that wisdom is mature and cautious in deliberating, and slow in determining; not stiff, positive, and peremptory, but reserving an ear open to fresh reason and evidence, and not ashamed to confess, that the knowledge of the best and wisest men is still dark and imperfect.

V. To have a principal regard to the practical truths of religion.

The *last* use I shall suggest of the foregoing considerations, is, that since God hath been pleased to conceal so many things from us entirely, and it is so exceeding difficult to arrive at any certainty in the knowledge of so many more, we should be persuaded chiefly to apply ourselves to

to the study and contemplation of such practical truths as are both better suited and proportion'd to the present capacity of our minds, and of greatest concernment for us to be inform'd of ; *i. e.* things of a *moral* nature ; such as relate to life and manners.

Now the things that concern our improvement in true virtue and goodness, have the best title to our esteem, Because they are necessary to be known. because the knowledge of them is absolutely *ne-*
cessary to that end. *The *knowledge* of God's Will is necessary to the *doing* of it ; and those things which have a more immediate and direct influence on our practice, are, in proportion, the most necessary. These are truths of the greatest certainty, and of the highest importance. This kind of knowledge is not an idle and impertinent curiosity, but *that* upon which our happiness depends ; it is *that* which promotes our everlasting interest, and teaches us to *escape from the wrath to come* ; in comparison whereof all other knowledge is but vain and trifling, *and knowledge falsely so called.*

If it be so necessary to know the laws of the land where we live, 1 Tim. vi. 20. because we are to be govern'd by them, and our present peace and welfare depends upon their being generally and duly observ'd, what is it to know the statutes of Heaven, those unchangeable laws of righteousness and goodness, those rules by which we must live and be happy for ever ? As to other parts of knowledge, however useful to some, they may generally be spar'd, and men may live well enough without them ; but he that
does

does not know *the good and acceptable and perfect Will of God*, and the way to eternal happiness, is an ignorant man whatever he knows besides; because he is defective in the great thing of all; he fails in the main point; in *that* which is of the utmost importance to him. So that the most valuable, the only necessary knowledge in religion, and to the acquisition whereof, we ought chiefly to apply ourselves, is that which has the nearest relation to, and the greatest influence upon practice; the plain duties and unquestionable doctrines of the Gospel; without which, we can neither see our way to happiness, nor be persuaded to walk in it.

*And very plain
and easy to the
meanest capacity.*

This kind of knowledge is farther recommended to us, by its being best proportion'd to our capacity, and most easy to be understood and apprehended by all of us. It is the great excellency of the Christian religion (the last and most compleat revelation of God's Will to mankind) that every thing in it necessary to be believ'd and done by us, in order to our eternal happiness, is, or may by proper helps, be made plain to every capacity. And with such helps, nothing else is requisite for understanding of Christianity, but an honest and sincere desire of being inform'd. It is an institution design'd by God to govern the wills of the honest and sincere, and not to exercise the parts of notional and curious men. We need not mount the wings of the wind, to fetch religion from the stars; nor go down to the deep to bring it up from thence; for 'tis with us, and before us; as open as the day, and

as familiar as the light. The Gospel was once a *mystery*, but the mystery is now revealed; and those things which we yet call mysteries, are plainly enough discover'd as to their being such as we believe them, tho' we cannot understand and explain the manner *how*; and (as was observ'd before) 'tis no part of religion to enquire into such *hidden* things, or explicitly to believe them, any farther than they are revealed. So that 'tis no piece of wit or subtilty to be a Christian; nor does it require great abilities, or much study, to know so much of religion as is absolutely necessary to salvation: every one of competent parts and industry, may easily know enough for this purpose. The *credenda*, or matters absolutely necessary to be believed, lye in a very narrow compass: *This is life eternal*, i. e. the way to it, *to know thee, the only true God,* John xvii. 3. *and Jesus Christ, as the true Messiah, whom thou hast sent.* And then for the *agenda*, or matters to be done, St. Paul hath given us a very short, but full summary of them: *The grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live godly, righteously and soberly in this present world.* Titus ii. 11, 12. These are very short and plain lessons; and yet even these well learn'd, would not fail to bring us all safe to the *end of our faith, the salvation of our souls.*

'Tis true, all revealed truths are to be believed when known and apprehended; and there are in the *Scriptures things hard to be understood.* But since the *Scriptures* in general, were written
for

for the instruction and direction of all sorts, even the meanest of people, there can be nothing absolutely necessary, but what may be sufficiently explain'd to them. The goodness of God would not suffer him to enjoin *that* as of indispensable and universal obligation, which is above the reach of vulgar understandings, and requires more abstractedness of thought, and intention of mind, than the much greater part of well meaning, conscientious, good Christians are capable of. So that however difficult or obscure, the Scriptures may be in some things not necessary, yet they are sufficiently clear and easy to be understood, whenever any thing is requir'd as necessary to salvation, in which all believers are alike, and equally concern'd.

And a regard to them is the best means for understanding those that are more difficult and obscure.

To encourage us to apply ourselves to the study and practice of the plain and unquestionable parts of the Gospel, (wherein all Christians do, and must agree) let us consider farther, that this is the best means to gain light into those that appear more difficult and obscure. *The secrets of the Lord are with them that fear him*, says holy David, and again, *I have more understanding than my teachers, because I keep thy precepts.* There is no better disposition for the finding of truth, than to be always very sincere in the practice of religion, so far as we do know it. For notorious errors in mens lives, do naturally dispose them to errors in *opinion*. The vices and lusts of men, are a dead weight upon their understandings, and hinder their assent to the

the clearest evidence : they are unwilling to believe *that* to be true, which is so directly contrary to their whole course of life. This makes so many greedily lay hold on every little objection against the first principles of religion, because it is their interest to have it pass for all fiction and falsehood : as one of their leaders said

Mr. Hobbs.

of *reason* ; when reason is against a man, he will be against reason, so the *word of God* is against them, and therefore they are against *it*. In short, no man can be secure of truth, who is not a friend to piety, and virtue ; nor is he likely to *understand* the Will of God aright, who is not willing to *obey* it. This is the method prescrib'd by St. Paul ; *holding faith and a good conscience, which* (good conscience)

1 Tim. i. 19.

some *having put away, concerning faith have made shipwreck*. In which words, it is clearly intimated, that they who do not act up to their present light, but *hold the truth in unrighteousness, or put away a good conscience*, are in the greatest danger of falling from the truth into the most dangerous errors and heresies. A mind therefore, fully dispos'd to *receive and obey the truth in the love of it*, is the best means for *understanding* it : he who is constantly exercised in the study and practice of the plain precepts of the Gospel, stands fairest for discovering the more obscure and abstruse parts of it. For, besides the natural tendency of such a behaviour to open and enlighten the mind, we have the promise of our Saviour himself,

John vii. 17.
viii. 12.

that *if any man will do his Will,*

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he

he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God ; and that he that followeth him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life ; i. e. shall know all things necessary to life eternal : whereas those who disregard and disobey the plain and unquestionable duties of religion, may, at last, so provoke God as to give them up to strong delusions to believe a lie, that (as St. Paul speaks) they all may be condemned that obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness.

And an infallible security that no mistakes in religion shall prove fatal to us, or endanger our salvation.

And as such a disposition and behaviour stands the fairest for truth, so it is intitled to another very great advantage, namely, that if, after all our care to prevent it, we should happen to be mistaken, yet such error shall not prove fatal to us, or endanger our eternal happiness. When we have thus honestly acted up to the best light we had, and made the best use we could of the powers and faculties God hath given us, and the helps and assistances afforded to us, we have discharged our duty both as reasonable creatures and Christians ; and though we should happen, in any instance, to miss of truth, we shall infallibly receive the reward of such an honest temper, and excellent disposition of mind, which is in the sight of God of great price. For whatever be the judgment of rash and uncharitable men, God God knoweth whereof we are made ; he will consider the several disadvantages we labour under ; make gracious allowances for the shortness and

and imperfection of our reason and understanding ; and not suffer our eternal happiness to depend upon our *opinion*, which is *not* always in our own power ; but upon our sincerity ; which *is*. If we carefully endeavour, in all things, to *know* and *do* the Will of God ; if we practise the *plain* and *unquestionable* duties of Christianity, we shall never be condemned for any invincible mistakes, about the *dark* and *mysterious* points of belief. This might easily and abundantly be supported, by Scripture and reason, if it were necessary. But because it may be a farther satisfaction to some to have the sense and judgment of the church, I will add the sense of the church of *England* in this point, out of the book of Homilies, where are these remarkable words, *viz.* “ Those things in the
 “ Scriptures that be plain to under-
 “ stand, and necessary to salvation,
 “ every man’s duty is to learn them,
 “ to print them in memory, and effectually to
 “ exercise them. And as to the dark mysteries,
 “ to be content to be ignorant of them until
 “ such time as it shall please God to open those
 “ things unto him. In the mean season, *if he*
 “ *lack either aptness, or opportunity, God will*
 “ *not impute it to his folly.*”

*Second part of
 the Homily of
 the holy Scrip-
 tures.*

The *conclusion of the whole mat-
 ter* shall be, that we be careful not
 to rest in the bare knowledge we have of religi-
 on, but make a good use of it in our lives. The
 truths of Christianity are not matters of pure
 speculation, and intended merely to inform and

The conclusion.

improve our understandings, but practical doctrines, design'd chiefly to renew and purify our minds and hearts, and to reform and regulate our lives and manners. And without *that* effect, the greatest knowledge, and most exact faith will be of no service to us ; we shall reap no benefit from them at the day of account, but shall rather *receive the greater damnation*.

This should be well consider'd by all those who seem to be so much concern'd about little speculative opinions in religion (which they always call fundamental articles of faith) that the practice of the great and substantial duties of a good life, is wholly neglected by them. *They are so taken up in spying and censuring heresy in others, that they never think of curing those lusts and vices, and passions that do so visibly reign in themselves.* But 'tis a gross deceit to imagine, that an *orthodox* Creed, will atone for an *heretical* practice ; or just notions of religion, discharge us from the obligation of its laws. An ingenious man may make a hard shift to say something for any error in the world ; but there is not a word to be spoken for a wicked life. So that, nothing is more certain, than that, whatever our notions be, an unholy conversation is the greatest error in practice, and at least, as damnable as any heresy in the world. For the necessity of *thinking* rightly, is derived from the necessity of *doing* rightly ; soundness of *belief* is in order to purity of *manners* ; and therefore the *latter* is of so much greater value and consideration than the *former*, as it has the nature

ture of an *end*, to which the other is but the *means*; the *latter*, is of it self necessary, the *former*, only in order to *that*. By which I would not be understood to mean, that men should come to a perfect indifference in matters of faith and opinion, either with respect to themselves, or others; for though *holiness of life* is indeed the great point to be regarded, yet *that* must be founded upon Christian principles; and therefore St. *Paul* joyns faith and a good conscience together, as both necessary---- *holding the mystery of faith, in a pure conscience*; the one is to be built upon the other. It concerns us therefore, to endeavour to find out the truth ourselves, and, by all Christian methods, to promote it among others. But then we must not stop here: our main care should be that the great truths of religion duly influence our practice, and regulate our moral conduct; that they purify our minds; govern our passions; and make us thoroughly good and virtuous in our lives. For as *without faith it is impossible to please God, so without holiness no man shall see the Lord*. But though this be the *one thing necessary*, and chiefly to be minded and regarded by us, yet it seems to be least of all consider'd: for (to use the words of a pious and aged divine of our church) "it is the misery of Christendom that we build too much upon articles of doctrine, upon opinions, tenets, and systems; and they must be subscrib'd to, sworn to, and believed, which causeth almost all the division

Mr. Strype's
sermon at Hack-
ney, Sept. 21.
1707. P. 12.

"sions of the Christian world---- We are so
 "earnest in asserting the orthodoxy of our own
 "espoused doctrines---- that we most lamentably
 "fall out, break peace, lose charity, and wretch-
 "edly neglect the weightier matters, judgment,
 "mercy and faith, and the practice of sincere
 "truth and righteousness",

F I N I S.

